

**Connecting a mountain archipelago:
Regional development in the Kootenay Region of British Columbia**



Canadian Regional Development: A Critical Review of Theory, Practice and Potentials
2011 Preliminary Findings Report
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Acknowledgements

Starting in the spring of 2011, I conducted interviews in the East and Central Kootenay Regional District, as well as the Kootenay Boundary Regional District. These interviews covered a wide range of questions; all focused on different aspects of regional development. I would like to thank all of the people who took the time to meet with me and share their thoughts and experience. In addition to simply responding to my questions, each person I spoke with helped illustrate important aspects of life and culture in the Kootenays. They demonstrated the ingenuity and positive attitude needed to succeed in rural Canada. My time in the Kootenays was very enjoyable and I look forward to returning in 2012.

I would also like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for funding this project, as well as my fellow project members.

Sarah-Patricia Breen
Vancouver
March 2012

Availability

Electronic copies of this report have been provided to all interviewees. Additionally, this report, as well as additional project information, can be found on the Canadian Regional Development website: <http://cdnregdev.wordpress.com/>.

Contact Information

For further information about this topic and the project, feel free to contact Sarah-Patricia Breen, Researcher for the Kootenay Region or Sean Markey, Principal Investigator.

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Introduction

“Canadian Regional Development: A Critical Review of Theory, Practice and Potentials” is a cross-Canada project investigating regional development, not only in theory, but also in policy and practice. Regional study areas were selected in British Columbia, Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario, and Québec to help better understand regional development at a local level. Research team members spent time in their respective regions, observing and interviewing key people on five themes: place, governance, rural-urban relationships, knowledge and innovation, and integration. These five themes combine to create what is being called “New Regionalism”, a different approach to regional development.

Our research intends to answer questions such as: How has regional development policy and practice changed from the 1980s? Are provinces approaching regional development differently? Are we adapting to changing realities such as globalization and technological change? Are we sharing new insights across our provinces and regions? By answering questions like these, we hope to inform policy-makers across the country, bring new information to the regions where we work, and re-inform and update the regional development theories and concepts that are taught in our universities and colleges.

In the following sections we will outline our research approach and present preliminary findings. These findings address the current state of regional development in the Kootenay region and also how regionalism may facilitate or hinder development in the area. Our findings highlight six core themes:

1. The importance of and barriers to effective **collaboration**;
2. How the diverse and fractured **geography** of the region both complicates communication and builds a strong sense of identity;
3. The prospects for regionalism to help address current demographic challenges and future **human capacity** needs;
4. The influence and impacts associated with **external actors and forces** operating on the region (i.e. tourists, second home owners, policy-makers, etc.);
5. The challenges associated with top-down and bottom-up **planning** and how to foster a commitment to long-term planning that is contextually appropriate;
6. How regional development **institutions** affect long-term planning for the region and may work together to address critical **infrastructure** needs.

Each of these themes reflect areas of active and lively debate within the literature on regional development practice and policy.

Research Ethics

Interviewees voluntarily participated in the interview process and their names will be kept confidential to the best of our abilities. This research was reviewed and approved by the Simon Fraser University Office of Research Ethics. If you have ethical concerns about the research you

may contact Dr. Hal Weinberg, Director, Office of Research Ethics at SFU, at hal_weinberg@sfu.ca or 778-782-6593.

British Columbia's Kootenay Region

Each region was selected to provide a local level perspective on regional development, helping to ground truth project findings from the provincial and federal levels. We selected regions to ensure diversity in population size, rural-urban interaction, industry dependence, regional development experience, and organizational frameworks and approaches. The Kootenay Region presented an amazing opportunity to learn about regional development in a unique area that combines geographic isolation with access to urban centres directly outside the region (e.g., Calgary, Spokane, Kelowna). A complex region, with overlapping regional jurisdiction, the Kootenay region greatly reflects the importance of place and context in development, presenting a valuable opportunity to explore the themes of New Regionalism.

Our intent was to interview as many local people as possible who hold/held positions related to regional development, including not only economic development, but recreation and environmental stewardship/water issues as well. Of the people who generously donated their time there was a mix of public sector representatives, development groups, and other community agencies. Twenty-six people were interviewed in 2011, the majority of which took place in the Kootenay Region, allowing myself as a researcher an opportunity to gain first-hand knowledge of the region. I completed additional interviews by phone. We identified interviewees through internet based searches, as well as recommendations by agencies and other interviewees. Of the interviews completed there were 10 municipal government interviews, 5 economic development agencies, 3 general regional interviews, 3 regional planning interviews, 2 regional environment interviews, 2 regional recreation interviews, and 1 other regional agency. As I will be returning to the Kootenays in 2012, I would welcome suggestions of agencies or people to speak with this year, as well as responses to these preliminary findings.

We have also conducted a review of regional and community documents to provide further regional context. In many cases interviewees provided documents without which this task would have been significantly more difficult.

Preliminary Results

These preliminary results¹ are based on initial analysis of the interviews completed in 2011, combined with a review of research notes, plans and strategic documents for the region. We have identified the following key themes as they were identified most frequently by the majority of the people we interviewed. In an effort to ensure an accurate portrayal of the region we welcome feedback regarding these preliminary results.

Collaboration and other "soft skills"

Answers to questions regarding regional strengths, development strategies, strategic planning, working with other agencies, future opportunities for development, and challenges to

¹ Additional results from more in-depth analysis and comparison with other regions are forthcoming.

development, resulted in many responses discussing collaboration and other so-called “soft skills” (e.g., communication, cooperation, relationship building). Collaboration was mentioned in too many examples to list, but included partnerships between governments (within regions, between regions, and within the province), between governments and development agencies, and between non-governmental agencies (e.g., academia and educational institutions). Cited both as the reason for success (e.g., efficiency, pooling resources, and lack of duplication) and failure (e.g., jurisdictional conflicts, cultural conflicts, history of regional competitiveness), these soft skills can be seen to be a critical aspect of regional development, tightly connected to the flow of knowledge and innovation within the region.

Positive reflections illustrate where collaboration and partnerships resulted in new ideas, new projects, successful execution of projects, building resiliency, and so on. Other responses cited barriers to, or breakdown of, communication and collaboration, both physical barriers in terms of geography and cultural/personality barriers. Common consensus was that soft skills required willingness and effort to be successfully employed. Two commonly mentioned sub-themes were that attention should be paid to collaborating as it *makes sense* to do so, and that due diligence is necessary when starting new projects to ensure duplication of effort is not occurring. The following theme, geography, often stood hand-in-hand with collaboration, as physical divides appear to create functional sub-regions within the larger regional districts. While seemingly straightforward, soft skills such as collaboration require persistence and resilience, facing personality and ideological clashes.

Follow up question: how can regional government help to facilitate constructive collaboration in the face of overlapping functional and cultural regions?

Geography

The inspiration for the mountain archipelago reference in the title of this report came from the many ways in which geography, both physical and cultural, emerged as a key theme. The physical geography of the region was said to both isolate and fracture the region, making economic development difficult. However, the same characteristic also provides unique opportunities for development. The availability (or lack) of developable land, the vastness of the area, and the proximity of the area to urban centres outside the region were continuously mentioned by interviewees. The mountains, rivers, and lakes have served to create many of the sub-regional areas, that could be considered cultural (associated with identity) or simply functional (more pragmatic – shopping, services, etc.). In some examples, the barriers presented by the geography seemed to hamper knowledge flow and innovation between the sub-regions. Examples of these sub-regions are sketched onto Figure 1.

The influence of geography was reflected in discussions on transportation, infrastructure, natural resources, available land, collaboration, sense of identity, and so on. Paradoxically, the natural divides created both positive feelings around community and negative feelings around isolation. The geography of the Kootenay Region presents a specific challenge and lens through which regional development must be viewed.

Follow up question: How can regional development leverage the assets and mitigate the barriers associated with a fractured regional geography?

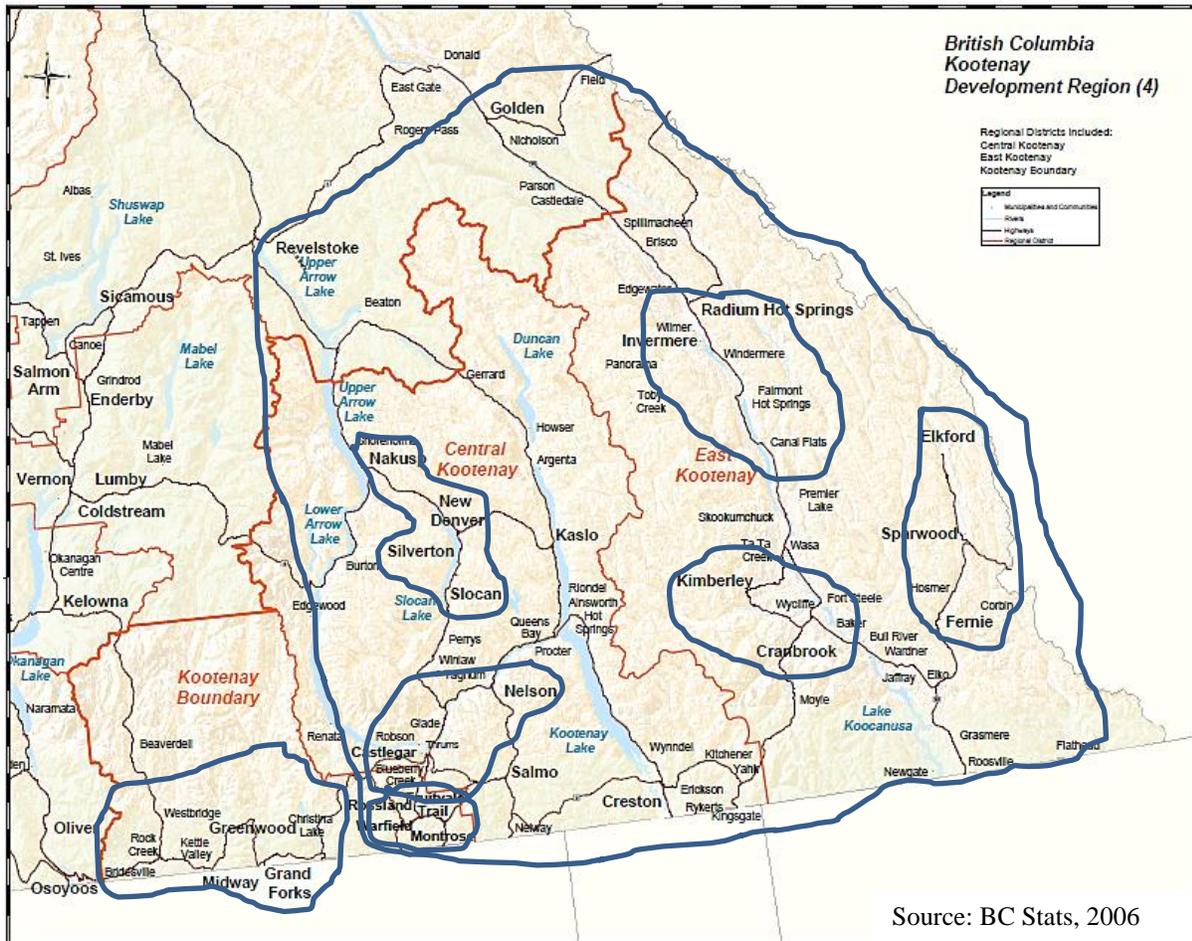


Figure 1 Examples of sub-regions within the Kootenay Region

People: demographics and human resources

Responses regarding challenges heading forward, as well as planning for the future resulted in discussions of people, in terms of the demographics of the region, but also in terms of human resources and capacity. Demographics were raised as a concern regarding the inflow and (more so) the outflow of people from (and through) the region. The issue of aging population brought forward with questions of the social and physical infrastructure (e.g., housing) needed to support a transitioning population base. Naturally, families, schools, health, and youth retention all played a role in these discussions.

Human resources were an equal focus. There appears to be a bit of a paradox where there is a lack of skilled workers, or more appropriately, a lack of the *right* skilled workers, trained in the various desired skills. Several interviewees pointed to the need to re-train the existing workforce as a result of changes to the economy, where different skill-sets are required than the skill-sets that currently exist. Some interviews brought forward concerns over steady employment (indicating unemployment) while others highlighted a lack of particular skills sets (indicating

underemployment). This challenge will be further reflected in the planning theme, particularly concerning economic diversification and consideration of economic shifts.

Follow-up question: How could regional development serve to address both immediate and future human capacity gaps?

Regional influence and control

Influence on the region from external sources (e.g., Alberta and the United States) was, at first glance, more apparent within the East Kootenays, which serves in many respects as a gateway to the Kootenay Region. However, additional review of interview responses showed that references to outside influence and control were consistent across the region. Cross border shopping (people going out of the region) and second home owners (people coming into the region) were two of the more prominent examples. Within this theme are sub-ideas of localism, protectionism, and competitiveness. Concerns over the type of development coming in, and how to maintain local values in the face of a changing landscape, were common. Mixed into this theme is a commentary on top-down versus bottom-up control in policy and planning, as well as tie-ins with economic development (leakage, diversification of local economy). Influx of differing values in the region also seems to add greatly to the question of development versus growth, although, as mentioned in the planning theme below, there are common threads between the two.

Follow-up question: How can regional development seek to mediate the convergence of internal and external stakeholders, economic interests, and values?

Planning

Many sub-themes surrounding planning were apparent from the interviews, as indicated in the discussions above. Place-based development and looking at “natural fits” (i.e., what assets exist in the area and how to build on them) is one sub-theme. Planning as a stumbling block, where overlapping jurisdiction and uncertain finances lead to short term planning where long term is needed was also discussed. This links to the human resources issue, where planning needs to be proactive as opposed to reactive in order to avoid shortages and crises. Additionally, planning as it relates to smart/strategic/sustainable planning, whether that is to manage development or encourage growth was also a strong theme. The common thread here is that long term planning, which was identified as a need at various scales within nearly every agency, is subject to restrictions of short term budgeting. Having “shelf ready projects” in anticipation of future funding was offered as one solution; however this provokes a guessing game of where and when the finances will flow next. Other concerns raised by interviewees are a) external funding priorities not being what needs to be addressed locally, and b) these initiatives being at odds with the direction the region may wish to take.

Consistent within the planning theme was discussion of power sharing, rural-urban relationships (both within and external to the region), and top-down versus bottom-up approaches to identifying priorities and policy responses. Issues of equity, both with the Kootenay Region itself, as well as between the region and the province are closely tied with planning and the resources available to planning.

Follow up question: How can regional development help to foster regionally appropriate long-term planning?

Foundations of Development

Lastly, infrastructure and institutions, listed as the foundations of development for the region, were prominent themes identified by interviewees. Development and diversification were strongly associated with building a solid and appropriate infrastructure foundation. Interviewees noted that there have already been too many quick fixes (e.g., water systems) and there is a need for smart planning (e.g., when you've torn up the road to fix a pipe, fix everything else under the same road at the same time). General infrastructure comments on housing and water treatment emerged; however, broadband (which was largely considered to be not only an issue of development but an equity issue as well) was the most cited infrastructure issue for the region.

Equally important to the build infrastructure, are the institutions which shape the region. The Columbia Basin Trust, the Regional Boards, and Community Futures were commonly mentioned as having the capacity to influence the region, although in some cases (e.g., the regional district) interviewees noted that the institutional structure could be revamped in order to provide the necessary support and guidance. The Columbia Basin Trust is a key example of an institution tied to the history of the region that both creates many positive opportunities, but also results in tensions within the region. Interviewees from within the Kootenay Region, but outside of the boundaries of the Columbia Basin Trust expressed feelings of a lack of equity surrounding development opportunities and funding, as well as a sense of segregation. There is also the importance of supporting institutions and continuing to build social capital when the times are good so that when times become tough these support systems are there.

Follow-up questions: How can a regional level institutions support long term planning at a community level, maintaining a consistent vision/direction for the region?

Discussion

The purpose of this report is to highlight prominent themes that turned up in the preliminary analysis of the 2011 interview data in the Kootenay Region. These themes provide a cursory overview of the region, its priorities, and approach to regional development. From here our project team will be able to examine New Regionalism within the regions and across other regions. We will now be able to dig deeper into what regional development means and how it does/doesn't function, as well as the roles it could potentially play in fostering sustainable forms of development for rural regions.

All five themes of New Regionalism are reflected to one degree or another within the Kootenay region; however the themes of knowledge flow and innovation, as well as place-based development are perhaps the most prominent. I expect that as we move forward these two themes will offer considerable insight for regional development in the Kootenays and for our research team.

Making Connections

As we move forward in 2012, I will be returning to the Kootenay Region to follow up with people I spoke with last year, as well as speaking to additional groups and agencies. This year's questions will be narrowed down based on last year's findings. As well, analysis will continue on the data collected in 2011 with forthcoming reports. I encourage anyone with questions or feedback to contact me.

We asked interviewees what they felt we could provide from our research that would be of use to the regions and the communities. The following questions are highly informative to our investigation into the prospects and potential of regional development. We will be working with these questions to inform our own research and report back to the community in the future about how regionalism is working for the Kootenays:

- How do the sub-regions within the Kootenay Region compare to one another?
- How does the Kootenay Region compare to other regions in the country relative to regional development? Are there gaps or lessons learned that can be put toward improvement?
- What are the operating structures of other regions within the country?
- What are strategies being employed to address funding dependency?
- What strategies are being employed for diversification? For example, are there successful strategies that have been used to attract remote workers to live within a rural region?
- What success stories and case studies exist from other regions, nationally and internationally?